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MIDSUMMER MEMORY

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A MIDSUMMER MEMORY

A Midsummer Memory

An Elegy on the Death of Arthur Upson

By
Richard Burton



Minneapolis
Edmund D. Brooks
1910

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NOTE

Arthur Upson, whom the following poem commemorates, was drowned from his boat in Bemidji Lake, Minnesota, in the early evening of August 14, 1908, in the thirty-second year of his age. A lyric, just written, found in the empty boat, is the "swan song" referred to in stanza XLVI of the elegy. He had that very day completed a poetic drama entitled "Gauvaine of The Retz," dealing with the Pornic legend of Gold Hair; but the manuscript disappeared with him and has never been found. During some ten years of literary activity, he published half a dozen volumes of verse and since his death his collected poems have appeared in two large volumes. Before his passing, recognition had come to him from distinguished critics and he was known to the few who treasure good poetry; the

publishing of his collected works has already begun to secure the wider hearing his song deserves.

It was under the branches of an ancient yew tree in the garden of Wadham college, Oxford, that Upson conceived the “Octaves in an Oxford Garden,” one of his best works. The yew was his favorite tree and was used as a design for his note paper. There is an allusion to this in stanzas XXXVII-XXXVIII. The poet’s predilection for the water, also alluded to in the elegy, was well-known to his intimate friends.

A MIDSUMMER MEMORY

I

Swift April ardours bring the white of May,
May merges into leafy June, and all
Mid splendours of full summer gild the day
And make the night an odorous festival
'Twixt star and sod; and yet, how wan the cheer,
I miss thee, Arthur, thou no more art here
To taste the beauty, laud the crescent year.

II

Strange is thine absence, since no son of man
Felt deeplier in his blood the summer lure;
Nor sang more sweetly, while the caravan
Of months passed stately by, nor was so sure
To list shy sounds, to smell the hidden flowers
And rediscover earth's reluctant bowers.

III

Yea, strange and sad. No thrush that flutes alone
Amidst the thicket but reminds of thee,
As, silver sweet and shy, he makes his moan;
No single bloom midst garden pageantry
But doth declare thee to my musing mind:
Thy presence gone, thy semblance left behind.

IV

In this thou livest and shalt ever live:
Of all the beauty of the breathing days
Thou art inextricably a part, dost give
An added loveliness, a new amaze;
Mine in the meadows, mine beside the leas,
Mine when I meet (since thou art part of these)
The splendour of the sunsets and the seas!

.

V

Were spring and summer half so fair, if first
They came into a world that knew them not?
Should we receive as now the thrilling burst

Of bud and bird-song, if each vernal spot
Had never known the resurrection bliss?
Is not our love of summer made up of this
Welcoming the old friend that summer is?

VI

And so with thee,— the beauty and the joy
Were never half to me so holy-deep
As since that thou art vanished, comrade, boy,
Dear singer, singing yet, although asleep.
I see all through thine eyes, I feel thee by,
I know that Memory will not let thee die.

.

VII

Hark! 'Tis the river-lay beyond the hill.
How often when we flee the city-spell
And gleeful turn to Nature, thence to fill
Our souls with peace and joyance, and to quell
The strife, we recognize old mother earth
As calling, calling to us in tender mirth;
How long witholden secrets come to birth!

.

VIII

Arthur, thy winsomeness of mood and mien,
Now treasured up in hearts that still are strong,
Must gradually, as fade the leaves, I ween,
Pass with those hearts the fleeting years along:
But O thy golden words! they still shall claim
Long life and honour and a singing fame!

IX

Thy golden words! Nay, silver were they too;
Betimes, like sounding brass they summoned us;
Again, with dulcet pleading, pierced us through
Whenso the hour was soft and amorous;
Or yet again, with pomp and purple pride
They seemed to open up down vistas wide
All ancient glories that have lived and died!

.

X

What pride in chanting hath a forest bird?
Doth any sunset with most spangled dress
Greeting the morn, e'er speak a haughty word?

Is not all nature one in humbleness?
So wert thou humble, priest of beauty, dead
Untimely, leaving us discomforted.

.

XI

There is companionship too close for speech:
Wordless communion is the best, meseems;
Such is betwixt us, and our spirits reach
To touch and mingle, waking or in dreams:
The union deepens, even as skies at eve
Grow mellow when the garish day-things leave.

XII

The green of marshes hath another hue
From that of inland meadows, and the scent,
Salt of the sea and pungent, interblent
With memories of sails upon the blue,
Comes from another world from that of hay
After June mowing; more unlike than they
Life seems, companion mine, with thee away.

.

XIII

I hardly know if sorrow or content

Have mastery as I brood upon thy loss :
Such comforting large thoughts are someway blent

With haunting pain ; the shadow of a cross
Is all uplit with radiance, and a voice
Weeping, becomes a voice that doth rejoice,
Although it wots not it hath made the choice.

.

XIV

The bronze magnificence of autumn woke

In thee an ecstasy that rivalled spring ;
It seemed as if some pent-up rapture broke

All bounds, when regal summer, on the wing,
Paused momentarily to hover, and became
A miracle of slumber and of flame.

XV

'Then wert thou fain to weave on wonder looms

Utterance of joy, stretching out eager hands
To May and eke October, apple blooms

Fellowing with asters, in such cunning strands
Of woven fairness, that two-fold delight
Was in the pattern of such colours dight.

XVI

There came an eve whose colors like dim strains
Of old forgotten music, softly stole
Into the sundown skies; the subtle stains
Of grey and pink and russet made a whole
Harmonious utterly; which faded slow
Into the mist-and-gold of night, and lo,
Even the stars were muffled in their glow!

XVII

Then felt I need of thee to share the sight:
It was too delicate to win the praise
Of many easy-moved to quick delight
In obvious skies that follow usual days;
But this, so marvellous in mood and tone,
This afterglow seemed meant for us alone.

XVIII

Alas, the summer waits thee! All her shows
Heaped up and heavenly proffer thee their boon,
And yet in vain the great procession goes;
Its chronicler no more beneath the moon,
Nor when the noon is high, walks as of yore:
Thy passing hath bereaved both sea and shore,
The very sea seems silent evermore!



XIX

The summer means renewal of old loves :
Again I meet the friendly wayside things
So tenderly recalled from other springs,
And in the mellow murmuring of ringed doves
I seem to hear remembered messages ;
It is another youth with all of these.

XX

But how with thee? May we fond mortals take
This blithe rejuvenescence for a sign
That likewise man, death's conqueror, shall break
The shackles of long slumber, drain the wine
Of ruddy life again, resume the dear
Deep fellowships he knew when he was here?

XXI

All Nature rises : sap climbs up the bole,
The flower-hand pricks the soil, the tiny leaf
Spreads sunward ; shall this struggling wight, the soul,
Alone be doomed never to burst its sheaf ?
Gladly to grow, soaring elate to sing,
Such seems the fate of each created thing.

XXII

Two inconceivables : that we can win
Our way from that dread land where silence reigns,
Where all our kind at length are gathered in,
When blood no more leaps buoyant in our veins ;
A place where there is neither glee nor grief,—
That we return from this, surpasses belief.

XXIII

But also it is dark to understand
How my so dominant spirit can be quenched
Forever : I am lord of all the land
Today, tomorrow from dominion wrenched.

How meaningless it looks, the bright, brief glory,
Sad with the shortness of all human story,
Sweet as the mocking-bird's rich repertory!

XXIV

Sometimes I step into the scented night
And feel a breathing Presence; then my fears
Vanish, and in their stead comes calm delight;
The home-call of the earth is in mine ears;
The universe throbs love, all life is one,
Swift through the velvet dark I find the sun.

XXV

But the mood passes, and the mystery
That shuts us in, crushes the mounting soul;
Passes the hope as well of me-and-thee;
The fond reunion and the final goal;
O Arthur, then both life and loving seem
The obliterated moment of a dream.

.

XXVI

Bespite the fear, the gnawing unbelief,
Thy presence were no miracle, I know,
If suddenly I saw thee: then my grief
Would be as it had never been, for O
'Tis easier far to believe thee close at hand,
Than banish one so bright to Shadow land.

.

XXVII

Once when the spring brought lilacs to a town
Loved of us both, we planned how we should wend
Together to that place of high renown
Where sage and dreamer dwelt, and tall trees bend
Above their sleep,—a precious spot. We said:
“Tomorrow”; and “tomorrow”; spring-tide sped,
We never went,—and, Arthur, thou art dead!

.

XXVIII

The heavens were kindlier in the mythic age:
The sun, a shining god, gave gifts to men;
The moon, fair women wight, was human then,

And stars were jewels on the poet's page.
One who had lost his friend might converse hold,
Leaning to listen up those courts of gold.

XXIX

But we are wiser now; the sky recedes
And all its friendly populace is fled.
Time, Space and *Substance* mock our deepest needs,
The heart goes hungry for the old faiths dead;
So must I seek for thee beyond the bars,
Higher than suns, behind the outmost stars.

XXX

But seek I will! and faithful in the quest
I swear to be so long as life may last.
Of all chill thoughts, this is the hatefulest:
That, slow but sure, the friendship-freighted past
Should fade, and I be satisfied to live
Unmindful, nor, as once, my homage give.

XXXI

If there be torture for the dear ones gone,
It must be in the thought that they are quite
Forgotten: not one soul to reckon on,
Of all who pledged them faith in death's despite.
Alas, Sad Heart, if thou return to see
Another in thy place and strange to thee!

XXXII

Hear me, dear Arthur, by whatever shore
Thou papest! As the year brings round the rose,
As winter wanes and all the harshness goes
Out of the ground; as balmier airs restore
Midsummer's soft elysian miracle,
And earth resumes the witch-work of her spell,—

XXXIII

I shall renew the sweet old habitudes
Were ours, forget thee never, cherish fond
Each look and tone and word, as one who broods

On something sacred from a land beyond
These present troublings; hear the oath I swear:
Where I am thou shalt be, forever there!

XXXIV

Summer shall be the bond that binds us twain,
Midsummer's purple pleasance be a tryst
Both of us haste to keep, and find again
Solace and comradeship the happiest
That men ere knew; midsummer's mounting tide
Of beauty still shall bear us side by side

XXXV

Unto the haven where all dreams come true:
For in this bounty of the gracious year
There is no room for grieving, every tear
Is dried, and every hurt attended to;
Together in the summer, thou and I,
Surely, such brotherhood can never die!

III

XXXVI

Lover of trees wert thou, but loved'st the best
The ancient yew a-muse in gardens old ;
Beneath her branches, as the sun rode west,
Came many a dream too fair to quite unfold,
And many a note of sorrow and of glee ;
Ineffable fondness seemed 'twixt her and thee.

XXXVII

Was it because, imprisoned in the bole,
Creature of sylvan glades and twilight moods,
A slim, bright girl yearned toward thee in her soul
And lured thee ever back to walk the woods ?
If so, thou shouldst have slept, all dreamings past,
Tranquil beneath the shade her leafage cast,
Keeping a solemn tryst, loved to the last.

XXXVIII

But no, another Presence with a cry
Deeper, more constant, drew thee to thy doom,
Haunted thy waking, nixy-like lurked nigh,
Sang requiems of rest within the tomb;
Strong was the tree-call, strong through all thy days,
But still more potent were the water-ways.

XXXIX

The water-ways are wondrous; rivers, lakes,
And bubbly well-runs in the inner wood,
Each has a voice that merry music makes
Or mournful, by the spirit understood:
Ever the ocean with her organ tones
Sings round the capes, or up the long sand moans.

XL

All the world sang for thee; wood-wind and brass
Made tonal harmonies to haunt thine ear;
The thinnest song from out the summer grass,
The tempest's choral-work, and, sphere by sphere,

The stars of God, chanting their rhythm clear,
All, all made music, all to thee were dear.
Woods, winds, and waters, how they drew thy soul,
Up, out, and ever toward its destined goal!

XLI

The water-call for thee was constant lure:
No Undine in a fable heard more sweet
The cool, soft croon, nor better loved the pure
Deep invitation where the mermaids meet.
So wert thou fain thine hours of ease to spend
Upon the bosom of this calling friend.

XLII

False friend and fateful day when thou didst glide
Ghost-like, at twilight, in the tiny boat
Out through the shadows of the eventide
Into the open waters, there to float
And dream; for as thou dream'st, some evil thing
Reached from the waves to seize thy life, and bring
Deep sadness unto all who dream and sing.

XLIII

The ebon trees against the saffron sky

At sunset-time attended thee; the day
Was fading, fading, tranquilly away

And soon the stars would shine serene and high;
Husht were the waves, the looming woods were ware,
Clad in the half light, rising mystic there,

XLIV

Of thee and of thy handiwork; Fate drew,

Along with thee, under the shadowy piers
Thy last, lost story-song wherein anew

Was told a legend out of elder years:
Sweet Gold Hair lived and loved beneath the sun;
Not ours but thine is she, till Time be done.

XLV

Fain of the summer thou, so it was meet

That on her midmost day of song and shine
Thy life should cease; surely, such end is sweet:
What seemlier close could heart of man divine

Than while the twilight tints ensoul the sky,
Part of the rapture of the sun's good-bye,
Swan-like to sing and, singing, so to die?

.

XLVI

I see two shapes that greet thee on the shore
Whereof the sun shines through eternal time;
Twin lords of Beauty, beautiful to name,
Who make life musical with lovely rime;
Above whatever once they knew of shame,
Despite or agony, they walk and smile,
Princes together, such forever more.

XLVII

Keats, who like thee died young, and Shelley too
Whom the wide waters swallowed; surely both
Do bid thee welcome, feeling nothing loth
To hail with comrade words and vision true
A fellow singer, one whose flute was tuned
To such a sweetness as to heal death's wound.

XLVIII

Rises before me the sweet, eloquent face,
The lithe form once again is at my side,
His speech is in mine ear, the moving grace
Of his dear presence warms the morning tide
Or makes the evening lovely,—lo! he's there!
I reach my hand,—and meet the empty air.

XLIX

Nay, but that air shall stir to the rich strains
He struck upon Life's harp; silence shall break
Into such harmonies for Love's sole sake,
As when a flower after its birth-pains,
Bursts, white and odorous and full of scent,
Above the earth to bloom for man's content.

L

Bloom ever, in the world's song-garden wide,
Dear one! I'll guard thee as a gardener
Would guard the growth he loves, nor let beside
Their fairness aught unsightly lift or stir;
Winds fraught with mignonette and orient myrrh
Shall make thy dim walks fragrant, thy retreat
A place for lovers, thy meanderings sweet.

LI

And O so long as love is love, and glee
Comes with the morning, and rich beauty broods
In twilight skies; so long as interludes
Of music snatch the soul from misery;
So long as souls an hunger for delight;
Arthur, thy words shall be of thrilling might.

LII

The soul goes single that hath Beauty known;
Lovers and troops of friends were thine, but they
Could not restrain thee from thy very own:

The spirit-summons from the Faraway.
The early Arthur, him of Camelot,
Brooded not straitlier on his mystic lot.

LIII

Even as Arthur of the Table Round
Followed the Gleam and fought the good fight
through,
Then floated down the mere unto the sound
Of flutes that like soft wind forever blew,
So thou didst straight embark and with a smile
Float on the bosom of the After-while.

LIV

The pure of heart are blessed; they shall be
God's chosen, he is close to them alone.
Lover of earth, now heaven hath claim on thee,
Boldly thine eyes face that refulgency
Of more than mortal keenness; for thine own
Were pure indeed; forever safe thou art,
Because thine often-heavy human heart
Rests, circled by that promise: *They shall see!*





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A midsummer memory

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